

Why Combat Engineer Battalions need a "Gunner"

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to

Major C.J. Bronzi, CG 12

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Engineer organizations have, throughout history, been required to fill the role of infantry as a secondary mission. The CEB is a well-armed and well-equipped organization capable of executing light infantry tasks in conjunction with other combat units. The only significant organizational deficiency is the lack of organic fire control personnel and communications equipment. Augmentation in this area would produce a credible and flexible light infantry organization.

*MCWP 3-17 Engineer Operations*

## Introduction

In 1927, Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune published a paper describing his belief of the role of engineers in the Marine Corps. He envisioned a service organization whose capabilities spanned the broad spectrum from performing military engineering as a member of a Marine Division in an amphibious assault to making cabinets for the garrison posts.<sup>1</sup> As the remainder of the combat arms communities evolves, incorporating more modern weapon systems and rapid, highly dispersed maneuver tactics, the disparity between engineers and the infantry they support in terms of combined arms employment is increasing. Therefore, the Marine Corps should provide each combat engineer battalion with a Marine Corps infantry weapons officer ("gunner", MOS 0306).

## Background

Today, combat engineers serving in the division are expected to perform the following duties: mobility, counter-mobility, and survivability indirect combat support to the maneuver forces of the ground combat element (GCE).<sup>2</sup> As a result, combat engineers require a high degree of proficiency in employment of supporting arms, which includes but is not limited

to combined arms breaching, river crossings, and route clearance. In addition to these primary mission essential tasks and training standards, combat engineers must also master infantry weapons skills in regards to weapons employment comparable to their infantry counter part in order to augment the infantry effectively and efficiently.

Engineers supporting other portions of the MAGTF already have an infantry weapons specialist at their disposal. Currently the Marine Wing Support Squadron (MWSS) table of organization includes a 0369 Weapons Specialist, a Master Sergeant's billet.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Marine Logistic Group (MLG) rates one 0302 infantry captain in the G-3 operations section who is responsible for infantry specific pre-deployment training for all units within the MLG. Despite possessing three times as many infantry weapons, the combat engineer battalions have no experienced weapons expert.

An infantry weapons officer can fill the void at division combat engineer battalions. Their current role is to advise infantry, LAR, and reconnaissance unit commanders on the tactical employment of organic weapons systems and is applicable to a combat engineer battalion. They assist in fire support planning, and develop, coordinate and monitor training programs in the tactical employment and preventive maintenance of organic weapons.<sup>4</sup>

## Weapon Comparison

- Weapons of CEB
  - 36 M240G
  - 36 SMAW
  - 8 M2
  - 8 Mk19
  - 36 MICLIC
  - 7 ABV
- Infantry Bn (from 1/5)
  - 24 M240G
  - 18 SMAW
  - 8 M2
  - 9 Mk19
  - 8 TOW
  - 8 Javelin CLU
  - 8 Mortars (81mm)
  - 9 Mortars (60mm)

Gunner's provide experienced weapon's systems expertise

Due to the nature of the Marine Corps combat engineer community advocating exposure to all facets of the military occupational specialty (MOS) by limiting consecutive tours in any one element of the MAGTF. As a result those individual Marines who come from the wing of MLG bring with them an inadequate infantry weapons training, proficiency, and combat employment while serving in the division. Therefore, the combat engineer platoons must rely on the limited experience of the platoon leadership. This lack of weapons experience affects the officer and enlisted community equally and has created a void that remains unfilled. Adding a Gunner to the operations

section of combat engineer battalion would greatly reduce the burden placed on company and platoon leadership.<sup>4</sup>

As a result the gunner's expertise allows the engineer leadership to concentrate their efforts in division engineer tasks.

#### Gunner's can advise engineer leadership

The Gunner is a source of knowledge on infantry related matters, as well as a source of experience on failed experiences and successful operations. Additionally, the role of the Gunner is to advise the commander. The commander in a combat engineer battalion can be identified as everyone from the team leader to the battalion commander. This is illustrated by division engineers attaching a fire team to a reconnaissance team or an entire combat engineer battalion supporting a division.

Gunner's assist in developing, coordinating, and monitoring training programs in the tactical employment and preventive maintenance of organic weapons. First and foremost the Gunner can assist the battalion commander in identifying trends within the battalion, and he can recommend corrections to overcome deficiencies. For the company and platoon commanders, he can be a sounding board to listen to ideas for training goals or to assist in shaping thoughts. For example, the gunner can

facilitate realistic training by maximizing the use of training ranges by incorporating demolitions and direct fire weapons.

This is crucial for company commanders who may have served in the MLG or wing command prior to coming to division. For the squad and team leaders, the Gunner can identify and instruct on the techniques to be mastered, such as techniques to properly employ the SMAW, zero the M203, methods of movement into final firing positions, and establishing a defense. Another critical contribution a Gunner can make to the combat engineer battalion would be cross training combat engineers with our infantry counterparts, which would be better facilitated by a "grunt-speaking" infantry officer working in the operations section. Engineers training with the grunts would build unit cohesion prior to combat operations.<sup>3</sup> The end result would be better trained, more proficient engineers who are able to render the most effective support to the entire GCE and reduce disparity in infantry weapons employment.

Additionally, today's extremely high deployment cycle leaves little to no dwell time for gunners serving in an infantry battalion or regiment. Adding a gunner to the combat engineer battalions would create a non-deploying billet that still keeps gunners in the MOS.

#### Counterargument

Opposition to this proposal focuses primarily on the limited inventory of 0306 infantry weapons officers. Last year the Marine Corps approved sending a gunner to each active duty reserve battalion and reconnaissance battalion.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, increasing the number of gunner's will result in decreased quality. Currently fewer 0369 Staff Non-Commissioned Officers are applying for the Warrant Officer program due to status and pay reductions.<sup>4</sup> For example, a infantry Gunnery Sergeant who is selected for the infantry officer program is most likely destined for selection to Master Sergeant. As a result he must sacrifice his seniority as a senior staff noncommissioned officer for the junior warrant officer rank which also includes a pay cut.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, some argue that engineer lieutenants should possess adequate proficiency in Marine Corps common skills to train their platoons. If this is the case why does the infantry weapons officer exist in infantry battalions full of Infantry Officer School (IOC) trained lieutenants. Although engineer lieutenants are called upon to augment the infantry they are not provided the same opportunities as infantry officers such as IOC or Small Arms Weapons Instructors Course (SAWIC).<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

Similar to the combat engineers in past wars, today's combat engineers must possess indistinguishable infantry weapons skill sets in order to accomplish their primary mission effectively and efficiently as well as augment the infantry. Adding a gunner to the engineer battalion's table of organization would provide engineer commanders with the latest tactics, techniques, and procedures necessary to employ organic weapons systems and perform our secondary mission of augmenting the infantry sufficiently. Thus, providing an infantry weapons officer to each combat engineer battalion will maximize their ability to support and augment the infantry units they directly support.

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## Notes

1. John A. Lejeune, MGEN Commandant, USMC. "The Engineer Battalion of the Marine Corps," Leatherneck Magazine. (Aug 1928). Reprinted obtained from Reference Section, United States Marine Corps Historical Center, HQMC, Washington D.C. 20380.
2. Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-17: Engineering Operations. Washington, DC: GPO, 2000.
3. Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, "Lessons for Leaders" (Revision 1) A compilation of reports for new commanders (27 March 2006), p. 106.
4. Mike Brooks, CWO4, USMC. *Pros and Cons of Gunners serving in combat engineer battalions*. Phone interview 17 December 2007.

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Brooks, Mike, CWO4. USMC. *Pros and Cons of Gunners serving in combat engineer battalions*. Phone interview 17 December 2007.

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